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ABSTRACT

The theory of multiple intelligences (MI) broadens the traditional view of intelligence as solely composed of verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities. MI theory maintains that all humans have at least eight different intelligences that represent a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate understanding. This digest underlines the basic tenets of MI theory and describes how it has been applied in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults. MI theory is not a prescribed teaching method, curriculum, or technique, but a way of understanding intelligence that teachers can use as a guide for developing classroom activities that address multiple ways of learning and knowing. Broadly speaking, teachers have developed four ways of using MI theory in the adult ESL classroom: (1) as a tool to help students develop a better understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and learning preferences; (2) as a tool to develop better understanding of learners' intelligences; (3) as a guide to provide greater variety of ways for students to learn and to demonstrate their learning; and (4) as a guide to develop lesson plans that address the full range of learner needs. Teachers who use MI theory to inform their curriculum development find that they gain a deeper understanding of their students' learning preferences and a greater appreciation of their strengths, which generally results in higher levels of student engagement. Students' increased engagement and success in learning stimulates teachers to raise their expectations, initiating a powerful expectation-response cycle that can lead to greater achievement levels for all. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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Multiple Intelligences: Theory and Practice in Adult ESL

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The theory of multiple intelligences (MI) broadens the traditional view of intelligence as solely composed of verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities. MI theory maintains that all humans possess at least eight different intelligences that represent a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate understanding. This digest outlines the basic tenets of MI theory and describes how it has been applied in teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adults.

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Intelligence has traditionally been defined in terms of intelligence quotient (IQ), which measures a narrow range of verbal linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities. Howard Gardner (1993) argues that humans possess a number of distinct intelligences that manifest themselves in different skills and abilities. All human beings apply these intelligences to solve problems, invent processes, and create things. Intelligence, according to MI theory, is being able to apply one or more of the intelligences in ways that are valued by a community or culture. The current MI model outlines eight intelligences, although Gardner (1999) continues to explore additional possibilities.

- **Linguistic Intelligence**: The ability to use language effectively both orally and in writing.
- **Logical/Mathematical Intelligence**: The ability to use numbers effectively and reason well.
- **Visual/Spatial Intelligence**: The ability to recognize form, space, color, line, and shape and to graphically represent visual and spatial ideas.
- **Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence**: The ability to use the body to express ideas and feelings and to solve problems.
- **Musical Intelligence**: The ability to recognize rhythm, pitch, and melody.
- **Naturalist Intelligence**: The ability to recognize and classify plants, minerals, and animals.
- **Interpersonal Intelligence**: The ability to understand another person's feelings, motivations, and intentions and to respond effectively.
- **Intrapersonal Intelligence**: The ability to know about and understand oneself and recognize one's similarities to and differences from others.

Application of MI Theory with Adult ESL Learners

Rather than functioning as a prescribed teaching method, curriculum, or technique, MI theory provides a way of understanding intelligence, which teachers can use as a guide for developing classroom activities that address multiple ways of learning and knowing (Christison, 1999b). Teaching strategies informed by MI theory can transfer some control from teacher to learners by giving students choices in the ways they will learn and demonstrate their learning. By focusing on problem-solving activities that draw on multiple intelligences, these teaching strategies encourage learners to build on existing strengths and knowledge to learn new content and skills (Kallenbach, 1999). It may also mean the adult learners who have had little success in traditional classrooms where only linguistic and mathematics skills are valued may experience more success when other intelligences are tapped. Likewise, adult ESL learners from cultures where other intelligences—such as interpersonal or musical—are highly valued may find the MI classroom a productive learning environment.

Broadly speaking, teachers have developed four ways of using MI theory in the classroom.

1. As a tool to help students develop a better understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and learning preferences. Christison (1999a) has developed an inventory to identify the preferred intelligences of adult English language learners. Learners are asked to respond to six statements about each of eight intelligences. An excerpt follows.

Multiple Intelligences Inventory for ESL/EFL Adults

Directions: Rate each statement 2, !, or 0. 2 means you strongly agree. 1 means you are in the middle. 0 means you disagree. Total the points for each intelligence. Compare your scores on the different intelligences.

Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence

___ 1. I like to read books, magazines, or newspapers.
___ 2. I often write notes and letters to my friends and family.
___ 3. I like to talk to people at parties.
___ 4. I like to tell jokes.
___ 5. I like to talk to my friends on the phone.
___ 6. I like to talk about things I read.

Logical/Mathematical Intelligence

___ 1. I can do arithmetic easily in my head.
___ 2. I am good at doing a budget.
___ 3. I am good at chess, checkers, or number games.
___ 3. I am good at solving problems.
___ 4. I like to analyze things.
___ 5. I like to organize things.
___ 6. I like crossword puzzles.

Naturalist Intelligence

___ 1. I like houseplants.
___ 2. I have or would like to have a pet.
___ 3. I know the names of many different flowers.
___ 4. I know the names of many different wild animals.
___ 5. I like to hike and to be outdoors.
___ 6. I notice the trees and plants in my neighborhood.

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Teachers may adapt the language and accompanying activities to suit the needs of the language learners in their classes. Word finds, pair dictations, dictionary and spelling work, focused listening, and grammar activities can help learners become comfortable with the inventory language even while they are engaged in skills work. Teachers may choose to let the students decide whether or not to score the inventory. Other activities, such as dialog journals, murals or bulletin boards, and small group conversations also offer adult ESL learners opportunities to reflect on their own strengths. The ideas and information that come from these activities can inform learner needs assessment and goal-setting processes.

2. As a tool to develop a better understanding of learners' intelligences. An understanding of MI theory broadens teachers' awareness of their students' knowledge and skills and enables them to look at each student from the perspective of strengths and potential. Teachers also become aware of the different ways in which students may demonstrate their understanding of material. MI theory provides a structured way of understanding and addressing the diversity that ESL instructors often encounter in the classroom (Christison, 1996). On a given topic or skill, teachers can brainstorm with learners a list of activities to practice. For instance, beginners can learn about consumerism by making and labeling collages of merchandise, reading newspaper ads, developing dialogues, or going on a scavenger hunt to the store. In this way, each learner can acquire language skills by employing individual strengths or preferences.

3. As a guide to provide a greater variety of ways for students to learn and to demonstrate their learning. Identification of personal strengths can make students more receptive to nontraditional learning activities and can give students a successful experience that builds their confidence as learners. As learners and teachers work together, intelligences can emerge naturally through partner interviews, preference grids (I can…, I like to…), and needs assessments. However, some teachers have encountered at least initial resistance to this process of describing intelligences among students whose cultural or educational backgrounds emphasize more traditional modes of teaching and learning (Costanzo & Paxton, 1999). In this case, teachers may choose to focus learners' attention on the language they are practicing through these activities rather than on the theory. (More challenges to using MI-based activities in the adult ESL classroom are described in the upcoming study on MI from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy [Viens & Kallenbach, in press].)

Teachers have noted other positive effects of applying MI theory. A curriculum informed by MI theory provides a way of handling differing language skill levels within one class—a very common situation in adult ESL classes (Costanzo & Paxton, 1999). When multiple activities are available, more students can find ways to participate and take advantage of language acquisition opportunities. With an MI curriculum, students become aware that different people have different strengths and that each person has a substantive contribution to make (Kallenbach, 1999). This fits in well with project-based learning where students in a group can divide tasks based on individual strengths. For example, one learner might feel confident about planning, another might prefer to do the writing, and a third might feel able to present the project to the whole class.

4. As a guide to develop lesson plans that address the full range of learner needs. An MI-informed reading lesson may begin with typical prereading activities (reviewing earlier material, predicting what will happen next), followed by silent reading or reading aloud with discussion of vocabulary and text meaning. Learners can then complete a project, individually or in groups, to demonstrate their understanding of the text. The teacher offers a choice of projects, such as descriptive writing, map drawing, illustration, creation of a dialogue or skit, making a timeline, song writing, and retelling. The objective is not to teach to specific intelligences or to correlate intelligences with specific activities, but rather to allow learners to employ their preferred ways of processing and communicating new information (Coustan & Rocka, 1999).

Teachers using this type of lesson report that students become more engaged in and enthusiastic about reading; the students gain greater understanding of material when they express what they have read in ways that are comfortable for them; and their reading strategies improve as reading becomes a tool for completion of projects they are interested in (Coustan & Rocka, 1999).

Conclusion

Teachers who use MI theory to inform their curriculum development find that they gain a deeper understanding of students' learning preferences and a greater appreciation of their strengths. Students are likely to become more engaged in learning as they use learning modes that match their intelligence strengths. In addition, students' regular reflection on their learning broadens their definitions of effective and acceptable teaching and learning practices. Students' increased engagement and success in learning stimulates teachers to raise their expectations, initiating a powerful expectation-response cycle that can lead to greater achievement levels for all.

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